John 5:24-29 (EHV)

11/18/18

EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A S.A.I.N.T.
1. S aved by faith, not by works
2. A live, physically and spiritually
3. I nnocent in spite of the evidence
4. N ot complacent
5. T riumphant

Today is Saints Triumphant Sunday, a day where we honor all those believers who have died and gone to heaven. I would like to do something a little different this morning. Close your eyes and clear your brain. I would like you to think of the first image that comes to mind when I say this word: saint. It really is not practical to ask every one of you what you saw, so let me suggest a couple possibilities.

Raise your hand if you saw a statue or a painting or a stained glass window depicting one of the holy men or women of the Bible. Raise your hand if you saw one of your sainted relatives, maybe a grandma or grandpa who is now in heaven. Raise your hand if you saw another Christian you know, respect and admire. And finally, raise your hand if you saw a picture of yourself.

I do not see any hands in the air for that last one. Why is that? Why didn’t you immediately identify yourself as a saint? Maybe it is because you remember some of the terrible things you have done. Maybe it is because you cannot forget some of the awful things you have said. Maybe it is because you know what kinds of evil thoughts your mind is capable of producing.

At the beginning of this service we confessed that we are disobedient sinners, that we have done what is evil and failed to do what is good, that we deserve eternal punishment. And so to think of ourselves as saints, to put ourselves on the same level as people like Peter and Paul and John, would be the height of arrogance. Or would it?

Martin Luther observed that it was common for first century Christians to call each other saints and he argued that this practice should be retained. Luther said: When Christians call themselves holy after Christ, this is not arrogance; it is honoring and praising God. For thereby we do not praise the malodorous holiness of our own works but his baptism, Word, grace, and spirit, which we do not have of ourselves; he gave them to us.

Because Jesus sacrificed his life for me, I am forgiven. Because Jesus shed his blood for me, my sins have been washed away. Because Jesus lived a holy life in my place, I am a saint. And so are you.

On this Saints Triumphant Sunday we honor all those believers who have died and gone to heaven, but we also recognize that this world (and this church) is filled with saints. In fact, the words of Jesus recorded in John 5 will lead us to see that EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A S.A.I.N.T. Saved by faith, not by works; Alive, physically and spiritually; Innocent in spite of the evidence; Not complacent; Triumphant

Before we talk about what a saint is, we need to have a clear understanding of what a saint is not. A saint is not someone who is strumming a harp on his or her own personal cloud. Saints are not people who always do everything right and never do anything wrong.

Saints are sinners. Sometimes they make mistakes. Sometimes they make bad decisions. Saints have their own unique quirks and idiosyncrasies. Saints have all sorts of problems in this life, but they also have something else, something much more important. Saints have saving faith.

Jesus said: Amen, amen, I tell you: anyone who hears my Word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He is not going to come into judgment but has crossed over from death to life. To avoid eternal condemnation, you do not have to be perfect. To be considered a saint, you do not have to do anything - except believe. And even that, even our faith in God, is a
Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. Paul wrote those words 2000 years ago, but they are no less true today. Christians of the first century and the 21st century are saved the exactly same way. We are saved by faith, not by works. We are saved, not because of anything we do for God, but because of everything God has done for us. By faith in him we are holy. Because of him we are saints.

If it sounds too simple, if it sounds too easy, if it sounds too good to be true, Jesus provides us with additional proof. The fact that we’re alive is proof of our saintly status. Jesus explains: Amen, amen, I tell you: a time is coming and is here now when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who listen will live.

Since Jesus makes it clear that this time is here now already, these words cannot be a reference to the Last Day, an unknown date in the future when he will return in glory and raise the dead. So if this verse is not a reference to Judgment Day, what time is Jesus talking about? When will the dead hear his voice and live?

God speaks to people through his Word and his Word (his voice) creates life whenever the seed is sown, whenever the water of Baptism washes clean a sin-stained heart, whenever the Holy Spirit brings another soul to believe and confess that Jesus is Lord.

Even when we do not feel like we are saved, even when we have doubts, even when we are teetering on the brink of despair, the very fact that there is a spiritual struggle going on inside of us is a sure sign that there is spiritual life.

At one time we were dead in our sins, but now we are alive, not just because the heart is still beating, not just because the lungs are still breathing. We are saints because the Word of God is living and active, and it is created a living and active faith in our hearts.

The word saint literally means holy one. And perhaps that is why many of us are reluctant to think of ourselves as saints. We know how unholy we can be. We know that we are far from perfect. In spite of that, in spite of strong evidence to the contrary, we have been declared innocent in the eyes of God.

If that does not sound fair, that is because it is not. If the wages of sin is death, then every one of us deserves to die. If the Lord kept a record of sins, then not one of us could stand. So how can we possibly maintain our innocence? And what judge in his right mind would ever hand down such an unjust verdict?

Only one - the man God has appointed to be the judge of all is also the Son he gave to be the Savior of all. Jesus did not ignore the evidence. He destroyed it. He carried the sins of the world to the cross and buried them in the tomb. He paid the ultimate price to give us the ultimate prize. And now when the Lord looks at us, he does not see convicted sinners. He sees saints. He sees people like you and me who have been declared innocent/not guilty by a gracious God.

We are free because Jesus has set us free. We are holy because God has made us holy. We appreciate the fact that our debt has been paid in full. We appreciate the fact that our eternal future is secure, but we need to be careful that our appreciation does not turn into apathy. We need to be on guard against spiritual laziness: Jesus has done everything for me, so what I do does not matter. I can do whatever I want. In fact, I do not have to do anything at all.

A saint is many things. A saint is saved by faith. A saint is spiritually alive. A saint is innocent in spite of the evidence. But Jesus’ words make it very clear that a saint is not complacent: A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out. Those who have done good will rise to live, but those who have practiced evil will rise to be condemned.

Wait a minute! Didn’t Jesus just get done saying that everyone who believes in him has eternal life? Doesn’t this verse tell us that we are saved by what we do? Don’t these words directly contradict what Jesus said only a few verses before? No, not if we let Scripture interpret
Scripture.

In Hebrews 11 we are told that **without faith it is impossible to please God.** That means there is a difference between a **good work** and a **good deed.** Anyone, Christian or non-Christian can do something nice for his neighbor, but only a believer can do something that truly pleases God. And so a good work is not something we do to get in God’s good graces. Good works are the evidence of God’s grace in our lives.

A young girl who was sightseeing with her mother at a cathedral was intrigued by how the sunlight was shining through the beautiful stained glass windows. When she asked who the figures in the windows represented, her mom said: **Those are the saints.** A look of understanding came over the girl’s face as she replied: **Now I know what saints are. They are people who let the light shine through.**

That little girl’s definition is a good one. Saints do not sit around staring up into the sky waiting for Jesus to return. Saints want to thank and praise God for the gift of eternal life. Saints are eager to serve God in this life. Saints depend on Jesus, the Light of the World, for everything, and they strive to let the love of Christ shine through them in everything they do.

This is one of my favorite Sundays of the church year. Today we remember all the Christians who have gone before us. Today we honor the memory of our members who have gone to be with the Lord in the past year. They have fought the good fight. They have finished the race. They have kept the faith. And now they are, in a word, triumphant.

But they are not the only ones. We are triumphant saints. Even though the fight is fierce, even though the warfare is long, the war itself is over. We know that death has been swallowed up in victory. We know that the serpent’s head has been crushed forever. We know that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

A number of years ago it became popular for Christians to wear wristbands imprinted with these four letters, W.W.J.D., which stands for **What Would Jesus Do?** I have a different suggestion this morning.

Instead of printing those four letters, W.W.J.D., let’s print these five letters: **S.A.I.N.T.** And whenever you put on one of those bands, whenever you look down and see it on your wrist, you will receive the comforting reminder that every Christian is a S.A.I.N.T.…

S – saved by faith, not by works
A – alive, physically and spiritually
I – innocent in spite of the evidence
N – not complacent
T – triumphant
Amen!

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